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ABSTRACT

A study of reading problems among Hong Kong university students of English as a Second Language has two parts. The first examines a teacher's comparison of a source text with a student's written response. The student subject was a highly-motivated, proficient learner. Discussion of her reading problems focuses on the incidence of misinterpretation of information presented in spite of her characteristic integrative reading strategy, and on her misunderstanding of an author's perspective that is not supportive of the views presented. The second part is a quasi-experimental study to document readers' problems in distinguishing an author's disagreement with views cited in academic discourse. Subjects were 77 university freshmen who read a 959-word extract from a sociology text and answered questions about the author's viewpoint. About half the students were given selective instructions for reading, and the other half were given holistic instructions. Results suggest that problems in identifying an author's viewpoint is common in this population, and that the selective reading strategy may have exacerbated these problems. It is proposed that students be given opportunities to articulate their interpretations of texts and the linguistic reasons for those interpretations. Three texts used in the study and a student worksheet are appended. (MSE)

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MISREADING VIEWPOINTS: READING PROBLEMS AMONG ESL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN HONG KONG

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Introduction

Despite a substantial body of research into reading problems among users of English as a second language, claims by teachers of English that such problems persist among ESL university students tend, in our experience, to be received with some scepticism. Learners themselves do not often rate reading as one of their major areas of difficulty, or as a desirable priority for courses in English for academic purposes (EAP). Subject teachers, course administrators and even some EAP teachers may reinforce beliefs that academic reading is not too much of a problem, at least not by comparison with listening, speaking or writing. Such thinking can influence the design of English teaching programmes and affect their potential outcomes.

Experienced readers will have inferred that we believe the reading problems of ESL university students, in our own teaching situation, to be in some danger of neglect, and to be in need of attention. Interestingly, less experienced readers of academic writing might not have drawn any such inference from our opening text. As we aim to show, the ability of readers to interpret viewpoints being developed within texts is often far from assured, even among quite advanced learners. We propose to describe reading problems that we have identified among students at the University of Hong Kong (HKU), to seek to account for these problems, and to suggest how teachers may make learners more aware of difficulties and misunderstandings that can easily arise in interpreting academic writing.

We do not underrate the difficulties that teachers and researchers face in identifying what a reader's interpretation of a text may be, or in deciding when such interpretations can justifiably be said to constitute a misreading and not simply an alternative reading of a text (see editorial comments in Alderson and Urquhart, 1984). Readers are invited to consider these issues within the contexts of the examples to be presented in this paper.

We accept that effective reading is interactive, in the sense of Carrell (1988): successful interpretation of meaning in texts will involve the interaction of top-down and bottom-up processes, so that a reader's interpretation is not driven solely by either an initially chosen schema or the parsing of successive word groupings. We would simply add that a good deal of less effective reading is also interactive in nature, as we shall exemplify.

In seeking to identify and describe students' problems in reading academic discourse, we shall draw upon action research involving individual learners as well as work in the experimental tradition that compares responses over groups of learners. Such a range of approaches seems to us to be appropriate to the purpose.[1]

Our examples in Part One are drawn from teacher comparison of a source text with a student's written response, supplemented by discussion with the student of how certain features of the source text are to be understood. Such intervention by the teacher is characteristic of action research (and teaching), but it inevitably raises the issue of how far a student's introspections, as elicited and reported during discussions, may reveal actual problems and processes in reading. We would not expect all difficulties to be identified in such ways, but we are confident that the kind of interviews we shall describe can bring to light, and help to rectify, some persistent learner misunderstandings of words, phrases, grammatical choices or discourse moves in texts.

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In Part Two, we report on a study in which a short comprehension test was used to elicit reader responses in an area where comprehension difficulties were anticipated, and to compare tendencies over groups of readers under contrasting conditions. A study of this kind raises its own questions of application to actual reading. There is always a danger that outcomes may be an experimental artefact rather than a genuine elicitation of ways in which readers (mis)interpret meanings in texts. Provided, though, that care is taken in interpreting findings, work in the experimental tradition will continue to offer useful insights into responses that are widespread in a given population of readers, and into factors that can influence such responses.

Part One: Individual Case-Studies

We may expect some reading problems to be widespread in a class, so that addressing these problems in teaching can help learners who have difficulties in common. Yet it is ultimately individuals, rather than groups, who have reading problems. One needs a better understanding of what individual difficulties actually are than a simple indication of who gives a wrong answer on some comprehension test item.

Individual learning experiences and difficulties can be explored through studies of introspective and retrospective data (see Faerch and Kasper, 1987). Interviews that elicit readers' own explanations of what they have understood from a text can greatly assist our understanding of how learners interpret what they read. A record of such interviews, in the form of transcribed audio recordings or of notes written in a teacher-researcher's diary, reveals important information about what a learner has understood from a text, the reasons the learner gives for this interpretation, and ways in which interpretations of particular linguistic patterns may contribute to or may be influenced by an overall (mis)understanding of the text. This is not to claim that researchers' accounts of such data are infallibly accurate, but simply that they are based on a fuller and more intensive individual study than is the case for most teacher and researcher judgements.

In relatively privileged teaching situations, it becomes possible to pursue such action research when working with individual learners. The following accounts are drawn from work with students who were taught individually for some time by one of the authors, K.S. Ip, at the Language Centre at HKU. The Centre offers a limited service to individual students who seek to improve their English language skills. A student is assigned by the Centre to meet a tutor on a one to one basis, and problems are discussed before a 'diagnosis' and advice for further action can be given. Students may occasionally return a number of times, depending on the nature of the problem, the motivation of the learner and the availability of a tutor. The more sustained study reported here involved many additional voluntary hours on the part of the staff member.

This service to undergraduate students was originally termed the 'Writing Clinic', which indicates that problems have most commonly been perceived by teachers and students alike as pertaining to writing rather than to other skills such as reading. Although students can now seek advice under any of the four skills, few if any 'complaints', to continue with the medical metaphor, are identified as 'reading problems' by students. One reason may be that students usually only become alerted to their own problems with (written) English when they receive negative feedback on tutorial essays.

One difficulty in presenting our findings is that extended contexts are often needed for the nature of a problem to be fully appreciated, yet a range of illustrations is also desirable. To reconcile these demands without making the paper unduly lengthy, we shall report two examples from one case study in some detail and others in summary form.

The subject of the more detailed case study is a third year arts student reading five papers in English literature and linguistics, and three papers in Chinese studies. This particular student is chosen for our discussion because of her readiness to engage in introspection. Her high proficiency in the first language seems to have given her an awareness of how language works. But perhaps of more interest to the discussion here is that she is a highly motivated learner, who makes sure she understands the vocabulary, but is not word-bound and uses an interactive strategy to work out the meaning of a text. Yet, as shown in the discussion below, she has not been successful.

This student undertook to read the "letters to the editor" column of the South China Morning Post, with a view to writing a response to a letter of her choice, in a similar expository style. This exercise was negotiated between the tutor and the student: it was felt that the student would show more interest in a topic if it is of her own choosing, that she would be exposed to a variety of views by different correspondents, and that the exercise would familiarize her with the forms of argumentation and refutation.

The first two examples, discussed in depth, will illustrate how an integrative strategy can still result in misreading.

Example 1

A letter (SCMP 23/7/90; full text in Appendix A) headed "Discuss this matter openly" on the subject of homosexuality includes the following four sentences in the course of an 11-sentence text, starting with:

a. "While listening to the debate leading up to the recent decision to abolish the law on homosexuality, I got the impression that most people see being homosexually orientated as an abnormal, hopeless condition which only deserves polite words of consolation."

The third sentence in the text reads:
b. "It is ludicrous to think that a homosexual ever chose to be attracted to his own sex."

The concluding paragraphs include:
c. "...and therefore we need an openness to discussing homosexuality which is brave and patient yet does not compromise moral standards. ..."

and end with:
d. "To homosexuals still struggling with their feelings, let's continue to work towards better things."

The student's interpretation of these four points was respectively:

a. The author sat through the debate, and learnt that being homosexually orientated is an abnormal, hopeless condition.
b. It is ludicrous for a homosexual to think that he ever chose to be attracted to his own sex.
c. Homosexuals are brave, however, to discuss things in the open.
d. They are still struggling...

It is interesting to note the internal consistency of the misinterpretation. A schema was tentatively set in (a) as information of common knowledge, that homosexuals are abnormal. This was confirmed in (b), that homosexuals are 'ludicrous', a word which the student checked in the dictionary. When the student came to (c), she admitted initially suspecting a possible discrepancy (though for the wrong reason): why does the author criticize homosexuals and then compliment them on their bravery? Her interactive strategy might have required her to rework what the author's

view was at this point. However, the concluding sentence (d) that they are still struggling confirmed her understanding that they are brave. Hence, her integrated comprehension was that the author, despite his disapproval of homosexuals, acknowledges their brave struggle, and asks the public to help them.

University students usually have to handle texts longer than this, which leads to the next question: how far into the text will this kind of conscientious but unsuccessful interactive reading carry the student before she is too perplexed? Our second example will illustrate the possible extent of such misreading.

Example 2

A letter entitled "Smoking ban on planes unnecessary" appeared in the South China Morning Post (SCMP 31/8/90). This letter is twice as long as our previous example, and carries relatively longer sentences. The opening section of the letter is as follows:

> "In recent weeks there have been several letters about smoking on aircraft, and this month an article has appeared in part suggesting that non-smokers may be at real risk from exposure to passengers who happen to be enjoying a cigarette.
>
> With the World Health Organisation and the British Medical Association calling for a total ban on airline smoking, it is high time that a few basic facts were aired on a subject which has become contentious for no good reason.
>
> Whatever anti-smoking activists may say, there simply is no reputable scientific consensus which can support so-called "passive smoking" as a serious health hazard."

It is clear to the experienced reader that the author is critical of previous arguments and challenges supporters to provide scientific evidence.

The student felt, however, that the author's position was that "non-smokers may be at real risk". Based on this she appeared to have established an initial schema, which she first had to test against "it is high time that a few basic facts were aired on **a subject which has become contentious for no good reason**". She looked up "contentious" and decided the meaning fitted in with the initial schema that 'smokers being at risk is a fact that warrants no controversy'. This (mis)interpretation was further fortified by the next few paragraphs, which were read by the student in the same light.

The experienced reader's understanding of the full text (in Appendix B) would be that the author refutes a previous correspondent's objections to smoking, and puts forward the argument that smokers have rights too, especially in view of:

a. the declared absence of statistically significant scientific proof of the risks of passive smoking;
b. the ease of improving air flow in aircraft.

The student, however, read "Other people's tobacco smoke may well be a nuisance or an irritation for some, in certain circumstances, but... " (the author goes on to explain the logistics) to mean 'smoke is indeed a nuisance', which was taken to be additional information, consistent with her understanding of the author's meaning. This understanding was further expanded to incorporate a

concessive opening "It is true that such measures would cost the airlines money, but..." to mean 'smokers are troublesome people and to accommodate them would incur additional costs'. Taken together with the logistics in improving the air-flow, which she, as a conscientious reader, does acknowledge, her interpretation prompted her to write:

> "The (previous) correspondent himself admitted that other people's tobacco smoking is a nuisance. This should not be doubted. How can he expect that the air conditioning system in such enclosed space to be efficient in eliminating smoke? All the arguments about improving the system and costs involved can be eliminated if people don't smoke."

By this point, the student was well into the text.

From the above retrospective analysis of the written summary and introspective analysis of the persisting interpretation, it is clear that conscientious interactive reading does not always ensure comprehension of an author's position. The next question would be: what type of authorial stance is most prone to misinterpretation?

On the basis of instances such as those reported here, it appears to us that students have persistent problems with missing the non-supportive stance that an author may adopt towards views that he or she is presenting. These instances include cases where an author is critical of another view, referring to it only in order to dismiss it; or where the author concedes the possible validity of a view, but seeks to draw the reader's attention to other aspects which are presented as more important. Whatever the variation, it seems that our students are not sensitized to the intended emphasis or weight put on each piece of information. Our next examples (3a, 3b, 3c) illustrate such tendencies.

Example 3a

This example is taken from another letter headed "Tam case shows checks and balances needed for HK" (SCMP 7/8/90):

> "Of course, no one is quite sure what is going to happen after 1997, but because the present regime in China has such a poor record in dealing with its own people, and it is well known that China's leaders are much displeased with the people of Hong Kong, it has been assumed - and wisely so - that precautions need to be taken."

The text was chosen by another student attending the Writing Clinic: a second-year female undergraduate from the Faculty of Arts, reading three papers in English. When asked to identify the main point in the written sentence, she felt that every piece of information was of equal importance, and they were not necessarily connected:

1. No one is sure what happens after 1997.
2. China has had a poor record.
3. China does not like HK people.
4. Precautions must be taken.

It is worth noting here that the student seemed to have been thrown off by the opening:

"**Of course**, no one is quite sure..., but..."

In our tutorial session, the student's attention was drawn to the two parts of the compound sentence connected by the word "but". An experienced reader would see the author as wanting to place emphasis on the second part, which would be the author's own position, and as playing down the first part which serves the function of acknowledging a differing view. The student, however, appears to have seen the two parts of the sentence as bearing more or less equal information load, with the connection behaving more like an "and", as in "I like oranges but I like apples too".

Comparable difficulties have already been noted in the case study of the third-year student, with

> "**It is true** that such measures would cost the airlines money, but ...";
> "While..., I got the impression that **most people** see homosexuality as..."

One may speculate on whether such indicators may loom more prominently and 'authoritatively' for readers of certain cultural backgrounds. In all three instances, students had missed the critical attitude that follows immediately.

In another example, it proved difficult for the third-year student to detect a negative, in this case ironic, authorial view in the sentence:

Example 3b

> "The Bill of Rights was finally passed at the Legislative Council on June 27. **The strong opposition based on political considerations has only served to strengthen public support for the Bill.**" (SCMP 3/8/90: "Best guarantee for a smooth transition")

The student's interpretation was, 'The strong opposition has managed to serve just one function, that of strengthening public support'; the student missed the author's ironic indication that the actual effect of the strong opposition was opposite to what was intended.

The earlier letters on homosexuality and on smoking both begin by referring to an existing view that their authors would then go on to reject. Another example of such a move appears in a letter on the condition of Filipino maids in Hong Kong. The first sentence of that letter reads:

Example 3c

> "The Commissioner of Labour's reply concerning foreign domestic workers spells frustration to those who had hoped for a genuine solution." (SCMP 3/10/90)

The stance of the letter writer towards the Commissioner of Labour's reply is clearly critical: the Commissioner's reply, it is said, only offers frustration to anyone hoping for a real solution. We can anticipate that the author is likely to continue by outlining what a genuine solution would comprise, and/or how the Commissioner of Labour's reply fails to offer this. The second-year student's understanding, however, was 'The Commissioner of Labour said that foreign domestic workers have a lot of frustration'.

This particular example might indeed be one of 'careless' reading (in which the significance of "spells frustration to", as distinct for instance from "spells out the frustration of", was simply not attended to), yet it is striking that such misreadings should also persist in obviously 'careful' readers, who take time and trouble to look up the meanings of words and to articulate the grounds for their own interpretation of a text.

It seems that our students tend to miss the critical comment in the author's point of view, mistaking it to be a supportive statement. Having formed a tentative but faulty top-down schema, 'careful' but ineffective readers continued to incorporate new information from the text into the schema, and to interpret text by reference to it. Researchers have begun to investigate the nature and possible origins of such dominant content as well as rhetorical schemata: see, e.g., Steffenson (1986). Further studies into cross-cultural discourse with subjects who are articulate and proficient in at least one language may well yield interesting results.

Part Two: A Quasi-Experimental Study

Persistent misreading of an author's preparatory moves towards establishing a critical view will undoubtedly be serious when students set out to interpret academic discourse. Although our earlier examples from readers' letters serve to show that moves of this nature are not peculiar to academic writing, they are certainly of importance to it. The extent to which such moves may cause problems to student readers clearly deserves study.

Work in the experimental tradition can help to establish how widespread certain errors in interpretation will prove to be among a population of readers. Comparison between control and experimental groups of learners can also indicate the contribution of a particular variable to the incidence of such problems, in spite of the variation to be expected between individuals on the same task.

In the above individual examples, we saw that subjects had problems in identifying contrasts between a view being reported in a text and the critical or distanced standpoint of the writer reporting it. Earlier experimental studies by Allison (1986; 1991) had investigated comparable reading difficulties among science students, at the University of Botswana (UB), in cases where textbooks presented theories that the textbook writer then went on to show to have been refuted by later scientific discoveries.

This discourse relationship has elsewhere been termed 'Hypothetical-Real' (Hoey, 1983; critical discussion in Allison, *1991: 379-80*). The basic problem was a widespread tendency among readers to take 'Hypothetical' reported theories as correct, despite the subsequent evidence and 'Real' verdict against them in the text. Comparable problems can be anticipated when an author's viewpoint, as inferred by experienced readers, is based on a different line of argumentation or a different value system to reported views that are rejected in the text.

Indications of such reading problems among students at UB had first come from inspection of students' own written summaries of a text; subsequently, experimental work elicited reader responses to test items focusing on the point at issue.

Aims of the study

A study was undertaken by Allison at HKU to document the incidence, in this population, of readers' problems in distinguishing an author's disagreement with views being cited (i.e. in identifying 'Hypothetical-Real' relations) in an instance of academic discourse.

A further aim was to compare outcomes for two sets of instructions, designed to elicit contrasting (selective versus holistic) reading strategies during the task. It was anticipated that readers who were encouraged to study the whole text before answering would tend to score higher than readers attempting to scan through the text to locate answers. For procedural reasons (see Methods section: "limitations"), this prediction was not treated as a formal hypothesis.

Methods

A quasi-experimental study was designed in the summer of 1990, during the writing of one unit of a new 60-hour in-sessional course in English for Social Science students. This course material was piloted in 1990-91 with students on the Bachelor in Business Administration (BBA) programme: the relevant unit was completed in October 1990.

Students

The students taking part in the study were first-year students on the BBA programme at HKU. These students had just completed an intensive 24-hour induction programme which had included introductory work on strategies for reading academic texts. They were in the early stages of a 60-hour in-sessional course designed and taught by the Language Centre and one staff member from the Department of English. Students were taught in six groups, with group size ranging from 13-18. This study was integrated into the teaching programme. It involved a total of 77 students: 40 received the 'selective reading' instructions, and 37 were given the 'holistic reading' instructions.

It should be noted that these HKU students had reached a higher educational level than the pre-entry students in the UB study: they had completed seven as opposed to five years of secondary schooling. On the other hand, most secondary schools in Botswana effectively used English as the medium of instruction. Reportedly, there were only occasional classes in which the national language, Setswana, was used alongside English. The ESL experience of HKU students is likely to have been more variable with respect to the use of English or of Cantonese during secondary school classes.

The co-operation of students and teachers was essential to the success of this study and is gratefully acknowledged.

Text and task

Students had to read a 959 word extract drawn from an introductory sociological text (Giddens, 1986: 9-13). This text was the second reading source for the unit, so the students had already been introduced to some relevant ideas about sociology as an intellectual enterprise. All readers had to respond either 'Yes' or 'No' to each of five test items. There were two different sets of instructions for the activity, in accordance with the experimental variable for the study. (The extract from Giddens (1986) and the alternative sets of instructions are reproduced in appendix C.)

The short test asks readers to decide whether the author would agree with each of five statements. The items of principal interest for the study are 1 and 2. These test items restate views that the author, Giddens, attributes to others (what Comte "claimed" and "believed", or what Durkheim "proposed"), but which he himself later explicitly rejects ("... although this type of standpoint has been very pervasive in sociology, it is one I reject").

Test items 3 and 4, statements actually made by the author, are distractors. Item 5 resembles items 1 and 2 in being a 'Hypothetical' viewpoint that the author rejects, but, for reasons of actual wording, this item would seem less liable to be misinterpreted. This is because the statement matches fairly closely the wording used when the author's own 'Real' viewpoint is presented in the text.

Alternative sets of instructions were designed in order to realize the experimental variable with regard to encouragement of particular reading strategies, respectively 'selective' (Group 1) and 'holistic' (Group 2). Thus, the 'Group 1' instructions call on readers to refer to the passage in order to answer the items, whereas the 'Group 2' instructions tell readers to read the whole passage first

before answering the questions. In each class, these instructions were handed out alternately, and readers were urged to follow carefully the instructions they had individually been given.

It has been noted that Giddens' own reporting of the 'Hypothetical' views that feature as test items 1 and 2 precedes his 'Real' rejection of these views in the text. It seems plausible in such cases that selective reading by inexperienced or unwary readers might be specially likely to elicit the unwarranted inference that reporting a viewpoint also entails endorsing that viewpoint. If this were so, the 'selective' readers (Group 1) can be expected, on average, to perform less well on their task than the 'holistic' readers (Group 2). This expectation will be explored in the analysis and discussion of data.

The activity was not a special test session for students but an exercise within the teaching programme. Students handed in their answers for purposes of the research, but kept copies for pair and then whole class discussion. Answers were compared in class immediately after completion of the activity. The teachers commented as needed on the ways in which the author's own viewpoint was signalled in the extract.

Limitations

The term 'quasi-experimental' has been used to emphasize the exploratory nature of this study, which is to be seen as an instance of action research using some experimental techniques. There had been no piloting of the text used, and no previous studies with the reader population being sampled. A full experimental design would have been premature and has not been realized. This is the reason that the study includes no formal testing of a hypothesis.

Specifically, there are two notable limitations in the design. First, the test that was used comprises only five items, three relating to the problem of reported views and two serving as distractor items. Second, the experimental variable -- selective response versus holistic reading of the text -- was only operationalized by means of written and spoken instructions to students. A more rigorous experiment would have had to present materials differently, possibly asking the 'holistic' readers to read the text and summarize its main points before test questions were distributed at all. Besides constraints in preparation time, these design features partly reflect the pedagogic role of the activity in class, which did not require elaborate or lengthy tasks.

There was also some variation in actual spoken instructions. Some teachers just emphasized the need to read the written instructions, while others specified the nature of the two sets of instructions -- thus making explicit the alternative reading approaches that these instructions were attempting to elicit. This was not considered a serious additional problem, with any effect being balanced across Groups 1 and 2, but it would also need to be controlled for in full experimental work.

Statistical treatment

Item facility values for all items will be shown, and descriptive statistics will present scores obtained by readers in the study. I.F. values for items 1 and 2 are relevant to the question of incidence of these readers' problems in recognizing that an author disagrees with views that he cites.

Regarding the additional aim of comparing outcomes for the two treatments, i.e. for the 'holistic' and 'selective' sets of instructions, descriptive statistics for the two groups in the study will be followed by an indication of trends that can be observed. This will be supported by chi-square analysis of each item, using two-tailed tests for statistical significance. This procedure was preferred

to comparison of group means, as there are only five test items, only two of which are directly applicable to the purpose. Item content was judged sufficiently distinct to support the assumption that the test items were independent.

It is again emphasized that formal hypothesis-testing is not being undertaken in this quasi-experimental study: the purpose of the statistical testing is to support the exploration of the data obtained and the interpretation of any trends observed.

Results

Table 1 shows item facility values for the whole sample, and also for each of the two groups constituted with reference to the two sets of reading instructions.

Table 1: Item facility values in a reading test calling for recognition of author's viewpoint.

Item no.	Total correct (i)	I.F. value	Group 1 correct (ii)	Gp.1 I.F.	Group 2 correct (iii)	Gp.2 I.F.
1.	44	.57	18	.45	26	.70
2.	52	.68	24	.60	28	.76
3.	53	.69	30	.75	23	.62
4.	62	.80	31	.78	31	.84
5.	68	.88	33	.82	35	.94

(i) 77 students took the test.
(ii) Group 1: 'Selective' reading instructions.
(iii) Group 2: 'Holistic' reading instructions.

Table 2 shows the scores obtained by learners under each of the two conditions (selective versus holistic reading instructions).

Table 2: Distribution of scores (out of 5) obtained in 'selective' and 'holistic' groups, on a reading test calling for recognition of author's viewpoint.

Group 1 ('selective')		Group 2 ('holistic')	
Score	Number of cases	Score	Number of cases
5	7	5	13
4	11	4	11
3	15	3	7
2	7	2	6
1	0	1	0
0	0	0	0

Each test item offered learners a binary choice of yes and no. One question is whether observed total scores for correct answers significantly exceed the value to be expected on the basis of chance (an I.F. of .50). For 'total correct' in Table 1, an I.F. value of at least .62 (representing at least 48 correct responses out of 77) is needed for the result to be statistically significant at .05 level (chi-square test, two-tailed, one degree of freedom) and thus to indicate that performance was better than chance. Overall results show that performance significantly exceeded chance on four items, but failed to do so on item 1. Item 1 also shows the greatest difference in results when Groups 1 and 2 are compared, with the Group 1 success rate being below 50%.

From Table 2, the distribution of scores in Group 2 is markedly non-normal and reflects high success rates for this group on the test, whereas that in Group 1 is closer to a normal distribution. Comparison of I.F. values in Table 1 shows higher values for Group 2 in four cases out of five, including the two Hypothetical-Real items (1 and 2), for which the differences in I.F. values are most marked (differences of .25 for item 1 and .16 for item 2).

Chi-square values for each item were calculated. For item 1, the difference in distribution of results over Groups 1 and 2 yielded a significant chi-square value of 4.033 ($p<.05$, 1d.f., 2-tailed). Item 5 was not tested as expected values fell below 5. Other values were not significant. Results indicate that item 1 was the most difficult of the five, and also that it was significantly more difficult for the group of learners who were instructed to read the text selectively in order to answer the items.

Discussion of Results

Sufficient evidence was obtained to support the view that problems in identifying an author's viewpoint (in the case of Hypothetical - Real relations) will be found quite extensively among readers from this population, and will merit further study as well as pedagogic attention.

There was some indication that a selective answering strategy may exacerbate the incidence of such problems. The use of chi-square to assess differences in distribution of answers over each test item can be criticized, because repeated use of a measure affects 'significance' of outcomes. In this case, however, there were only two items for which an effect was anticipated because the other three items served rather as controls. Furthermore, only a two-tailed significance test was used. It seems reasonable to accept that the trend observed on item 1 can be attributed to something other than chance. It appears likely that for this test item the higher rate of success among readers given 'holistic' instructions was partially a result of the reading strategy being encouraged in that group. Obviously, this issue would need more rigorous and extensive study, involving other learners, texts and tasks, before firm general conclusions could be offered.

One more limitation was suggested by other findings after the study. A mid-course questionnaire revealed that the teaching unit in question received relatively low student ratings for utility and especially for interest. This need not imply that the particular activity we have described was so rated; teacher observation had suggested that the test and immediate feedback successfully focused learner attention on both the task and subsequent discussion of how and why the writer had disclaimed some of the views he cited. Nor would general doubts about level of interest explain why performance should be less successful on a particular test item or under one of two sets of instructions for the task. None the less, we would like to emphasize our earlier warning that results on one reading test may not fully reflect reader performance in other situations. It is for reasons such as this, and not merely as a polite convention, that the usual call for further research is warranted.

Concluding Remarks

Moving from informal impressions of possible reader problems into carefully documented research is important, but is not easy. We are fully conscious that our respective studies have involved a small number of individual subjects or a small number of reading test items, and that more comprehensive research is needed to provide a stronger basis for generalizations. Yet we need not be unduly apologetic. Ours is a field in which generalizations have to be made, by teachers and by administrators, and in which authoritative research in the particular learning context is usually postponed to some ideal future. If generalizations about students' learning problems can become somewhat better informed -- and if the remaining complexities and unresolved questions are made that much more apparent to all concerned -- we believe that it is possible for findings from studies such as our own to be put to sensible use.

In the present case, we have provided reasons to suggest that students' reading problems are more serious and persistent than might have been anticipated, and, in particular, that readers' difficulties in identifying the critical stance of authors towards viewpoints being reported concessively or contrastively could usefully be addressed by teachers of English for academic purposes. For this, we would emphasize the value of individual face-to-face discussions in which students are induced to articulate their interpretations of texts and linguistic grounds for reaching these interpretations. We would also argue in favour of whole-text or extended extract rather than piecemeal search reading when the aim is to determine authorial viewpoint.

NOTES

1. The recent literature on classroom language learning research encourages exploratory and qualitative studies in order to generate insights, and to throw light on particular situations and experiences, without too much concern for immediately demonstrable generalizability of findings: see, e.g., van Lier (1988). This cannot mean that workers in our field no longer regard hypothesis-testing and generalizability as important, but it indicates that we have learned how difficult it is even for experimental research to furnish conclusions that are valid beyond particular situations. The need for comprehensive and rigorous study before broad claims are made has to be respected if applied linguistics is to remain a responsible mode of enquiry. See also Chaudron (1988).

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Letter in South China Morning Post (23/7/1990)(reproduced with permission).

Discuss this matter openly

While listening to the debate leading up to the recent decision to abolish the law on homosexuality, I got the impression that most people see being homosexually-orientated as an abnormal, hopeless condition which only deserves polite words of consolation.

They fail to realise that a homosexually-orientated person goes through a very human and not uncommon struggle. It is ludicrous to think that a homosexual ever chose to be attracted to his own sex.

A crucial distinction must be made between sexually-active homosexuals and people with a homosexual orientation who have not entered into a homosexual relationship. The first group has made a voluntary decision to lead a homosexual lifestyle, while the second still desires to deal with the problem without giving in to his desires.

A homosexually-orientated person will go through a difficult period of confusion and alienation while trying to define his identity. Acceptance and encouragement from family and friends are paramount in keeping him from resorting to homosexual relationships to obtain the love and the acceptance he needs.

Homosexuals are no more at fault for their feelings than heterosexuals are for being tempted. How we choose to deal with the temptations is another matter, and therefore we need an openness to discussing homosexuality which is brave and patient yet does not compromise moral standards. Relying on laws or brushing off the problem as a repugnant disease requiring clinical therapy will definitely not protect Hongkong from what it fears the most, wide-spread homosexual activity.

To homosexuals still struggling with their feelings, let's continue to work towards better things.

RAYMOND CHIU
University of Toronto

Appendix B

Letter in South China Morning Post (31/8/1990)(reproduced with permission).

Smoking ban on planes unnecessary

In recent weeks there have been several letters about smoking on aircraft, and this month an article has appeared in part suggesting that non-smokers may be at real risk from exposure to passengers who happen to be enjoying a cigarette.

With the World Health Organisation and the British Medical Association calling for a total ban on airline smoking, it is high time that a few basic facts were aired on a subject which has become contentious for no good reason.

Whatever anti-smoking activists may say, there simply is no reputable scientific consensus which can support so-called "passive smoking" as a serious health hazard.

All the comment is based upon opinion which deplorably has been presented as fact, now believed as gospel by many smokers and non-smokers alike. This is especially unfortunate as new research is emerging which is illustrating how flawed and uncertain some of the earlier work has been.

Other people's tobacco smoke may well be a nuisance or an irritation for some, in certain circumstances, but on aeroplanes in particular, the interior airflow system and the change of cabin air content, every few minutes, militates against any significant problem.

Moreover if airlines chose to increase the cabin airflow rates, which would be no bad thing for a number of reasons, together with raising what is often a most uncomfortably low level of humidity, the opportunity for complaint by non-smokers would disappear completely.

It is true that such measures would cost the airlines money, but the increased costs would be extremely small, such as adding less than HK$5 to the price of a seat from Hongkong to Singapore.

Interestingly, flight deck crews enjoy a cubic foot per minute rate of ventilation around the 150 mark, whereas a passenger norm is seven.

An accepted comfort level should be no less than 20 cfm. And when humidity ought to be at 40 per cent, on long haul flights, passengers commonly experience as little as two per cent. So airlines have some responsibility to make a few housekeeping improvements themselves, including better screening from fuel vapours and ozone, instead of taking the all too easy option of blaming the visible tobacco smoke for those dry eyes, sore throats and the general lassitude so familiar to regular air travellers. Research has revealed that tobacco smoke in aeroplanes has next to nothing to do with such symptoms.

Even the chance of cancer from cosmic radiation while flying has been held to offer a higher statistical risk than health problems from airline smoking, but what do we ever hear about cosmic radiation, or being somehow screened from that? You have a predicted death rate from this radiation being discounted as minor, and of no genuine concern in terms of statistical risk, while the practically negligible alleged statistical risk from "passive smoking" is cited as a reason for a worldwide ban!

Finally, have the airlines fairly asked their passengers, a large minority of whom would like a facility to smoke on board, whether these bans are either welcome or necessary?

The level of complaint about smoking on aircraft is in truth extremely low, and an example from the US makes the point. Over a 10 year period there, only a single smoking complaint was received for every one million passenger miles flown.

So just where is the groundswell of opinion pushing the airlines into ignoring the personal freedoms of people who wish to take pleasure from a relaxing smoke while flying?

A.D.C. TURNER
Managing Director
Asian Tobacco Council

Appendix C

Extract from Giddens (1986) and two task sheets.

READING (2). **SOCIOLOGY: A Definition**

> ... In the light of these remarks, a definition can be offered of the subject as follows. Sociology is a social science, having as its main focus the study of the social institutions brought into being by the industrial transformations of the past two or three centuries...
>
> ...Many of the prominent thinkers associated with the development of sociology were impressed with the importance of science and technology in contributing to the changes they witnessed. In setting out the aims of sociology, therefore, they sought to duplicate, in the study of human social affairs, the successes of the natural sciences in explaining the material world. Sociology was to be a 'natural science of society'. Auguste Comte, who lived from 1798 to 1857, and who coined the term 'sociology', gave this view its clearest and most comprehensive formulation. All the sciences, he claimed, including sociology, share an overall framework of logic and method; all seek to uncover universal laws governing the particular phenomena with which they deal. If we discover the laws governing human society, Comte believed, we will be able to shape our own destiny in much the same way as science has allowed us to control events in the natural world. His famous formula, Prévoir pour pouvoir (to be able to predict is to be able to control), expresses this idea.
>
> Since Comte's time, the notion that sociology should be fashioned upon the natural sciences has been the dominant view of the subject - although it has certainly not gone unchallenged, and has also been expressed in various differing ways. Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), one of the most influential figures in the development of sociology in the twentieth century, continued some of Comte's emphases. Sociology, he declared, is concerned with 'social facts', which can be approached in the same objective way as the facts with which the natural sciences deal. In his short, but very influential book The Rules of Sociological Method (1895), Durkheim proposed that social phenomena should be treated like things: we should regard ourselves as though we were objects in nature. Thereby he accentuated the similarities between sociology and natural science.

As I have mentioned earlier, although this type of standpoint has been very pervasive in sociology, it is one I reject. To speak of sociology, and of other subjects like anthropology or economics, as 'social sciences', is to stress that they involve the systematic study of an empirical subject-matter. The terminology is not confusing so long as we see that sociology and other social sciences differ from the natural sciences in two essential respects.

(1) We cannot approach society, or 'social facts', as we do objects or events in the natural world, because societies only exist in so far as they are created and re-created in our own actions as human beings. In social theory, we cannot treat human activities as though they were determined by causes in the same way as natural events are. We have to grasp what I would call the double involvement of individuals and institutions: we create society at the same time as we are created by it. Institutions, I have said, are patterns of social activity reproduced across time and space. It is worthwhile reflecting for a moment upon what this involves. To speak of the 'reproduction' of social conduct or social systems is to speak of the repetition of similar patterns of activity by actors separated from each other in time and space. It is very important indeed to stress this point, because much social theory - including that of Durkheim - is pervaded by a tendency to think in terms of physical imagery, a tendency which can have damaging consequences. Social systems involve patterns of relationships among individuals and groups. Many sociologists picture these patterns as rather like the walls of a building, or the skeleton of a body. This is misleading because it implies too static or unchanging an image of what societies are like: because it does not indicate that the patterning of social systems only exists in so far as individuals actively repeat particular forms of conduct from one time and place to another. If we were to use this sort of imagery at all, we should have to say that social systems are like buildings that are at every moment constantly being reconstructed by the very bricks that compose them.

(2) It follows from this that the practical implications of sociology are not directly parallel to the technological uses of science, and cannot be. Atoms cannot get to know what scientists say about them, or change their behaviour in the light of that knowledge. Human beings can do so. Thus the relation between sociology and its 'subject-matter' is necessarily different from that involved in the natural sciences. If we regard social activity as a mechanical set of events, determined by natural laws, we both misunderstand the past and fail to grasp how sociological analysis can help influence our possible future. As human beings, we do not just live in history; our understanding of history is an integral part of what that history is, what it may become. This is why we cannot be content with Comte's idea of *Prévoir pour pouvoir*, seen as social technology. In the social sciences, we are addressing other human beings, not an inert world of objects. It is often precisely by showing that what may appear to those involved as inevitable, as unchallengeable - as resembling a law of nature - is, in fact, an historical product, that sociological analysis can play an emancipatory role in human society. At the same time, sociological analysis teaches sobriety. For although knowledge may be an important adjunct to power, it is not the same as power. And our knowledge of history is always tentative and incomplete.

Source: Giddens, Anthony (1986), *Sociology*: A brief but critical introduction (second edition). London: Macmillan Education. Extracts from pages 9-13.

Reading 2: Task sheet.

Group 1: *Instructions*. Complete the task individually. Then pair up with a member of Group 2.

Answer the items below one by one, by referring selectively to the passage. Do not change any answers once you have written them.

As soon as you have finished, make a copy of your answers for your own reference (Just copy your answers, not the question items). Then immediately hand in this task sheet. Then read the whole passage.

Questions. Below are five statements. Does the writer (Giddens) agree with them? Answer YES or NO in each case.

1. Aims and methods of sociology should be modelled upon the natural sciences.

1. Answer: _____

2. Sociology should treat 'social facts' like things in nature.

2. Answer: _____

3. We can call sociology a 'social science' to emphasise its systematic study of empirical subject matter (subject matter that can be observed and measured).

3. Answer: _____

4. Social systems involve patterns of relationships among individuals and groups.

4. Answer: _____

5. Practical applications of sociology are like the technological applications of science.

5. Answer: _____

Name of student: _____

Remember to make a copy of your answers before you hand in this completed task sheet.

Reading 2: Task sheet.

Group 2: *Instructions.* Complete the task individually. Then pair up with a member of Group 1.

Read the whole passage first. Then answer the questions below. Do not change any answers once you have written them.

As soon as you have finished, make a copy of your answers for your own reference (Just copy your answers, not the question items). Then immediately hand in this task sheet.

Questions. Below are five statements. Does the writer (Giddens) agree with them? Answer YES or NO in each case.

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